

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Collaborative leadership in skills development: Getting the fundamentals right

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Abstract:

Collaborative leadership in skills development is fundamental for the success of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and state education institutions like Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs) in promoting sustainable livelihoods and social wellbeing in communities. The purpose of this research was to find out how Nongovernmental Organizations and state education leaders collaborate in building skills, what challenges hamper collaboration and what should be done to improve collaboration. The qualitative research approach was used in this study and nine participants from five organizations were purposely selected and interviewed. The major findings indicated the existence of inadequate collaborative practices between NGOs and educational leaders, exacerbated by recurrent major challenges like disunity or fragmentation amongst NGOs, over dependence on external funding and weak capacity which hampered their sustainability as partners as well as skills developers. This study has not only re-emphasised the need for effective collaborative leadership between NGOs and educational leaders in South Africa, it has also provided suggestions to their numerous challenges.

Keywords: Collaborative leadership, Skills development, National skills development strategy, Non-governmental organizations, Sector education training authorities

Introduction

Skills development has been spotted by partners in education as a solution to the damaging effects of skills shortages and unemployment especially in rural communities. Consequently, there is the growing need for a concerted commitment to continuously seek appropriate practices that could enhance skills development initiatives and sustainable livelihoods (Ayee, 2002). Nair and Campbell (2008), highlight the indispensability of partnerships between marginalized communities and support agencies from the public, private sector and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in developing skills, empowering rural communities, and promoting Local Economic Development. Collaborative leadership practices between state education institutions operating as Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and education NGOs could be one way of improving outcomes in skills development initiatives. However, it is often easier to talk than to walk the talk. The main aim of this study was to identify the challenges encountered so as to improve on cross-organizational collaborative leadership practices in skills development.

Democratic South Africa from the onset was characterised by social and economic problems such as poverty, inequality, unemployment and mass rural exodus, envisaged as the by-products of absolute and relative shortages of scarce and critical skills, and triggered by deprivation and the famous “bantustan” form of education that was administered in black communities (Daniels, 2007). Skills development is indispensable in livelihoods creation, and the socio-economic development of communities. The skills development Act of 1997, which was reviewed in 2008 and 2010, gave birth to the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) -being implemented under the auspices of the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), through SETAs and other institutions responsible for education and training, emphasized on the relevance of improving the quantity, quality and significance of skills, with the overall goal of increasing self-reliance, economic competitiveness and improving the quality of life of South Africans.

Orthodoxy in progressive governance demands leaders of state education institutions and NGOs to work collaboratively in achieving such goals. The idea of coordination has been highlighted by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Today, many NGOs are increasingly involved in skills development projects (Mcewan, 2003; Ulleberg, 2009). There is increasing acceptance that planning processes that involves many stakeholders can facilitate project ownership and forge partnerships that contribute to the attainment of mutually desired goals. State-civil society team work produces more effective outcomes than when partners act independently (Brinkerhoff, 1998). Nel and McQuaid (2002) illustrated how participation and skills development creates human capital and livelihoods as well as also social cohesion in communities.

However, collaboration vis-à-vis skills development is held back by many challenges (Mutangadura, 2006). These challenges range from inadequate communication and weak capacity to inadequate evaluation of relations. NGOs’ roles in skills development go beyond advocacy, being the watch dog of masses, service delivery, research and policy input (Ghaus-Pasha, 2005; Tandon, 2000),

some of which are construed as the unique roles of the sector. State institutions also perform exclusive roles like facilitation, provision of funding and issuing of accreditations. As partners, these exclusive roles from both sectors are complementary and mutually beneficial. Therefore, it would be worthwhile for both sectors to work in unison and to continuously strive to improve on such relations.

A significant number of studies relating to education, growth and development have been carried out in rural South Africa (Arendse, 2011; Binns, & Nel, 1999; Bloch, 2009; Gardiner, 2008); however, it seems very limited studies have indeed focused on strengthening collaborative leadership practices in skills development. This study was inspired by the desire to help enhance our understanding of collaborative leadership and improve on such relationships. Effective collaborative leadership practices among stakeholders would be of relevance in enhancing skills development and reinforcement initiatives in communities, with a corresponding bearing on sustainable livelihoods, poverty alleviation, self-reliance and social cohesion.

The study was guided by the following research questions: How do NGOs and state education leaders collaborate in building skills? What challenges hamper collaboration? What should be done to improve on collaboration?

Literature review

Collaboration is a fundamental component in high performing organizational settings. A broad spectrum of research in organizational behaviour, group relations, teamwork and effective leadership produced a pool of theories that postulated the correlation between collaborative practices and high performance. The significance of leadership that encourages and enhances partnership or teamwork is therefore very crucial. According to Yukl, Gordon and Taber (2002) a significant number of studies in leadership effectiveness attempts to locate specific leadership behaviours that foster individual and group performance. A run through theories that have associated collaboration as an integral component of learning organizations and communities of learners, will improve our understanding of practices that foster collaborative leadership.

Collaboration as epicentre of organizational learning

Organizations are required to undergo continuous internal changes as well as adaptations to changes in environments in which they operate. Learning has been envisaged as a prerequisite for the continuous existence of modern organizations (Lähteenmäki, Toivonen & Mattila, 2001). The use of cross-functional teams comprising of members of specialized subunits in an organization and from external partners in joint ventures outside the organization is now increasingly relevant in interdependent activities with each team taking charge of planning and conducting versatile activities that demand meaningful coordination and joint problem solving among partners (Yukl, 2010). One could flawlessly suppose that organizations are neither totally independent units nor archipelagos; the manifestation of learning is not restricted to collaborative practices within

individual organizations but also requires the creation of external networks with other organizations.

This implies organizations are expected to experience internal learning as a prerequisite for the successful formation of external networks (collaboration) and interact with other organizations as communities of practice. Successful organizations subsequently rely on their potential to invent themselves as social learning structures and take part in broader learning structures like professional groups, an industry and a consortium. Being part of a professional learning community is therefore also fundamental to our individual learning (Nkengbeza, 2014).

Determinants of collaborative leadership

It is not by default that the following important words: process, influence, facilitation, individual, collectiveness and shared values occur in many attempts to situate the meaning of leadership (Yukl, 2010; Northouse, 2011). One core challenge of leadership is how to create a conducive environment that facilitates a sustainable level of innovation and team learning (Yukl, 2009).

Genuine communication and dialogue: Nkengbeza (2014), and Nkengbeza, Pulkkinen and Kanervio (2015) have named genuine communication as a key underlying component (catalyst) for the success of professional learning communities. Authentic and dependable communication and discussions are essential determinants of leadership practices that foster collective performance. Individuals with the dependable leadership attributes, i.e. self-awareness, self-regulation and relational openness, are best placed in promoting genuine dialogue among members of the organization, thus enabling learning at and between multiple levels of the organization (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008). Understanding one another by members of a team is an important requirement of collective learning (Nkengbeza, 2014; Nkengbeza et al, 2015). Being aware of each other's perceptions and role expectations through genuine discussion sessions helps members to easily coordinate their actions (Yukl, 2010). According to Mazutis and Slawinski (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008) genuine discussions with features such as honest and transparent exchanges, fosters shared meanings and understanding and has a positive bearing on the way groups learn to detect and amend mistakes while inspiring members to query assumptions. They also argue that genuine discussion decreases workplace emotions and enhances double-loop learning. To Yukl (Yukl, 2010) "secrecy is the enemy of learning." Acting secretly, provokes a feeling of distrust and uneasiness among members and creates incompatibilities like conflicts between individuals (Greenwood, 1997).

Clarity of functions and teams capabilities: An organization will likely prosper and become sustainable when it has members that are highly skilled, committed, and have mutual trust (Yukl, 2005). The capability of individuals increases the level of shared belief in a team, which Yukl (Yukl, 2010) referred to as "collective efficacy or potency". Group members' commitment is in part a result of the mutual belief that the group has the capability to successfully carry out its project and attain designated targets. A group with a high self-esteem is also likely to portray a more positive mood (Yukl, 2010). The manner of designing job roles and assigning individuals to specific duties determine how efficiently the team carries out its activities. Consequently, group performance is impressive when members have the know-how required to do the task and they

understand what to do, how to do it, and the timeframe for it to be done (Yukl, 2010).

Evaluation and monitoring: Greenwood (1997) holds the opinion that inquiry or the discovery and rectification of mistakes are essential elements of organizations that truly learn. There is a great probability that learning from experience will occur when a methodical analysis is made after an important project has been finalised, to explore why it was a success or failure (Yukl, 2010). Such practices are also useful in maintaining situational awareness. This entails being aware of external and internal processes that affect the organization or team (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005). It is complex to adequately analyse the origins of a problem and apply lasting solutions without a lucid understanding of previous activities and decisions that led to the existing problem, the reaction of people to be affected by major changes and the political processes that defines the approval of strategic decisions (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005). Yukl (2002) uses the term “after-activity review” to represent the process of jointly evaluating the processes and corresponding results of a group activity.

The state of collaboration between NGOs and education leaders

The growing willingness of state institutions to incorporate NGOs' participation in public sector planning and management has led to the emergence of alliances and various modalities and levels of skills development (Ulleberg, 2009). There is an existing conception that the NGO sector constitutes a practical substitute to the government as an agent of development aid (Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2010). Many NGOs pride themselves as instruments of change and engage with the education sector in recognizing problems, designing programmes and carrying out various interventions with the prime objective of improving the country's capacity (Ulleberg, 2009).

Exclusive roles of NGOs: South African NGOs are considered core stakeholders in skills development because of their unique or exclusive attribute of being more effective in their operations than government agencies, especially in remote environments. This has enhanced their complementarity with the state as mutually indispensable stakeholders in skills development. Furthermore, they have a more resourceful and adaptive capacity than national governments. This implies that, in relation to development, their actions will be more beneficial to the general society, especially rural communities if they increase their operations and engagement with the government and impart their know-how and methods at the government level (Ulleberg, 2009). The following attributes are often applicable in describing their actions: small scale, flexible, dynamic, adaptive, local, efficient and innovative, which makes them complementary to state actions. Because the state's capacity and structure hampers the flexibility required to try new education approaches, the NGOs enjoy a competitive advantage on the ability and desire to innovate (Sequeira Modesto & Maddox, 2007). Nikkhah and Redzuan (Nikkhah & Redzuan, 2010) observe that the NGOs are at their best in mobilizing the poor and being accessible in remote hinterlands, empowering poor communities by improving their livelihoods, promoting local ownership of projects and strengthening local institutions they are more costs-effective and efficient in executing projects than the government, and ensure the sustainability of

communities through service delivery initiatives like relief, welfare, basic skills, providing for education needs, public policy advocacy and being watchdog.

Exclusive roles of the education sector: The government has the exclusive role of ensuring citizens' access to information and the opportunity to be proactive in skills development ventures by creating an environment that enables and fosters governance (Ayee, 2002). This implies that educational leaders' mandates for skills development are instrumental in ushering and enabling a climate for effective collaboration. According to Johanson and Adam (Johanson & Adams, 2004) the state can be proactive in exclusive roles such as developing policies, setting standards, investing in training materials and instructors, funding training so as to meet equity goals and fill strategic skills shortages, implementing skills training in priority areas in which education NGOs service providers are unwilling to operate, improving public awareness about the training system and implementing quality assurance by monitoring and evaluating training. Fox, Ward and Howard (2002) identified and categorized the exclusive functions of the public sector in promoting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). In their assessment Fox, Ward and Howard (2002) explained that the public sector has in many ways been responsible in ensuring an enabling environment through the following ways: mandating by outlining basic standards for performance, facilitating by ensuring access to information, financial and other incentives that enable organizations to perform, partnering by acting as participants or facilitators and endorsing through direct recognition of efforts of organizations in the form of accreditations and awards.

Some impediments and answers to collaboration

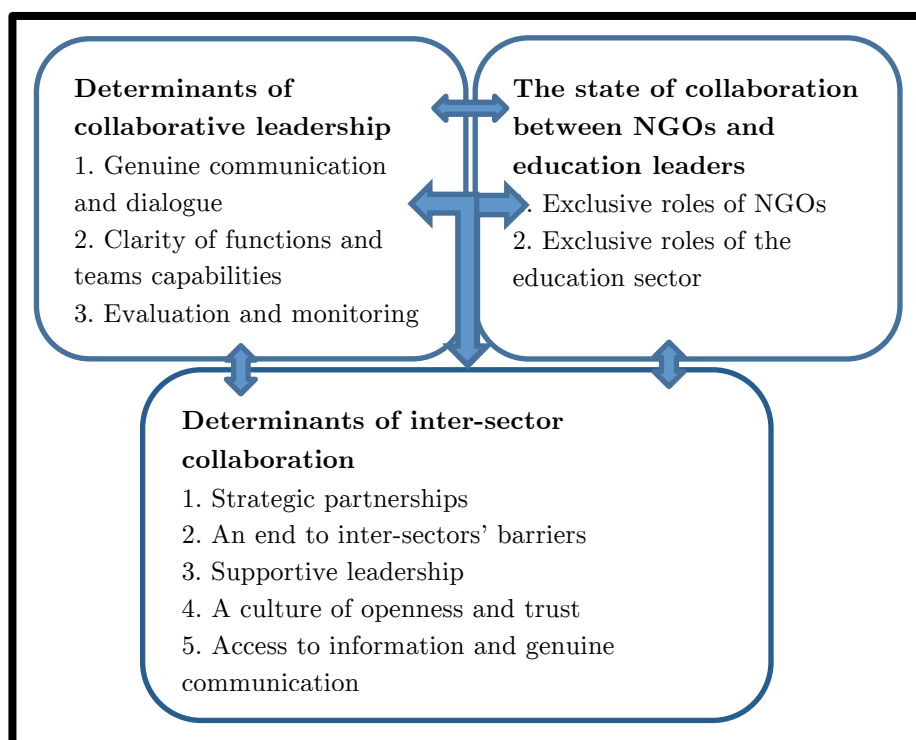
Collaborative relationships between sectors often dwindle, thus inviting expert brainstorming on how to improve collaboration. Mutual resentment and lack of trust remain crucial impediments to cooperation (Ulleberg, 2009). Some state agencies interpret NGOs' interventions as a form of encroachment and invasion of the authority of the government (Miller-Grandvaux, Welmond, & Wolf, 2002). On the flip side, NGOs consider the state as an adversary that should be neglected in order to achieve their personalized mandates. Skills development endeavours will remain diminutive until both sectors learn to work as partners rather than enemies (Ulleberg, 2009).

In addition to the common rift between the NGOs and the state, NGOs are continuously deficient in resources (Ulleberg, 2009). The reckless rush for funding from donors by NGOs to meet their organizational goals has also been spotted as a problem because it ignites unhealthy competition and disunity amongst NGOs and thus impedes partnership (Mayhew, 2005). Nelson (2003) elucidates that NGOs often forfeit a considerable amount of their autonomous rights to strategic decision making, programme designing and implementation to the influences of governments and donors whom they solely rely on for survival. Moreover, some observers have also noted that NGOs rapidly collapse when there is no external funding. Julie (2006) envisage the need for NGOs to adopt a financially self-sustaining model through other forms of fund raising activities that will help avoid financial crisis and extinction when donors do not comply. Employing sustainable financial strategies through service diversification and money generating activities provides backups and enables NGOs to remain sustainable even during external funding droughts (Julie, 2006). The creation of the South

African NGO Coalition (SANGOCO) was an inspirational attempt aimed at fostering interconnection efficiency and sustainability in the NGO sector (Julie, 2006).

Inadequacy in capacity, communication and access to information are issues that we can't ignore. Issues like task duplication are often the direct aftermath of inadequate means of communication and dwindling capacities from both the NGOs and the government. These problems exert a negative spill-over effect on sustainability, collaboration and skills development (Ulleberg, 2009). Strategic partnership practices are fundamental millstones to successful collaboration. Lendrum(2003) argues that strategic partnerships are often inspiring and successful when workplace emotions like fear and departmental barricades have been removed, ownership of projects and commitment is inculcated in members, empowerment has taken place, there is prevalence of leadership, disagreements have been resolved, openness restored, trust has become a culture, access to information and communication has been improved and there is cost-effectiveness and increase in value.

Figure 1: A conceptual framework for collaborative skills development between NGOs and the educational sector



As shown in the figure 1 above, genuine collaboration and dialogue are key determinants of collaborative leadership be it in professional learning communities (Nkengbeza et al, 2015) or at various levels of organisational development. In addition, clarity of functions and teams' capabilities will improve organizational performance (Yukl, 2010). There is no doubt that the level of performance will depend on proper monitoring supported by a good vision for the organization. Even though NGOs and the educational sector are two different organizations, both sectors could achieve much more if there is improved

collaboration between them. This framework has suggested that both sectors should form a strategic partnership, end inter-sectors' barriers to collaboration, implement supportive leadership at all levels, build a culture of openness and trust between the sectors, and use genuine communication as a tool to improve inter-sectors' understanding (Mazutis & Slawinski, 2008; Yukl, 2010; Northouse, 2011).

Research method

The qualitative research of a phenomenological nature was employed as the most appropriate method to collect, analyse data and reach a conclusion because it is the most suitable in restricting any form of preconceived bias from the researcher that might cloud the opportunity to actually understand the phenomena of collaboration from the viewpoints of the NGOs and educational leaders. This was in conjunction with Eagleton (2000) and Moustakas(1994) slogan of "back to the things themselves!" to corroborate the idea that this methodology has an important objective of ensuring that things are returned to reality. Creswell (2007) argues that an awareness of some general experiences of many people or individuals could be significant for groups like development practitioners, leaders, educators and policy makers in developing a more profound understanding of the attributes of a phenomenon in order to formulate policies and practices.

Data collection

The strong desire to collect data that reflected the perspectives of the research participants resulted in the choice of in-depth, unstructured interviews as the primary data collecting technique. Contact interview sessions ensured direct contact with respondents and improved the researcher's understanding of their perspectives. Creswell (2013) and Patton (2005) explained that interview presents the researcher the means to get hold of the experiences, knowledge, thoughts and feelings of respondents.

Research respondents were purposely chosen from individuals collaborating in Workplace Skills Development (WSD) in rural South Africa. Kruger and Stones (1988) labelled this move as looking for individuals with needed experiences for the phenomena to be studied. Seven participants were selected from two SETAs and two education NGOs respectively. The inclusion of two respondents from the Department of Rural Development and Land Reform implied that triangulation (Cox, & Hassard, 2005) was also exercised. Consequently, a total of nine respondents were chosen from five organizations from the state and education NGOs. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and the final transcriptions were considered the primary source of data (Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis as a way of analysing text data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was applied in this research, because the method is data-driven and exceeds merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts. Moreover, it takes into account the examination of meanings, unreservedly

generated themes and patterns that might be considered manifest or latent in a given text (Sandelowski, 2000).

Since the primary data was text-driven, the priority was to carefully go through the amalgamated interview transcripts and generate meaningful themes from them. It was also relevant to situate the nature of collaboration and difficulties encountered as revealed in transcripts and respondents' perspectives. Van Manen(1990) argues that conducting a study in human science, necessitates the crafting of texts in order to get hold of the structure of sense in terms of meaningful units. Reflecting on lived scenarios then becomes reflectively in analysing the structural aspects of such experiences.

While taking into consideration the common and exclusive themes of all interview transcripts, a composite synopsis that represented the primary nature of collaboration was established. These incorporated themes presented the fundamental nature of the phenomenon termed "essence" or "essential, invariant structure" (Creswell, 2007). This was possible by prudently identifying common themes in all of the transcripts as well as specific disparities to avoid grouping regular themes particularly where significant variations existed.

Ethical considerations and validity

Tracy (2010) identified credibility, honesty and ethical considerations as strong determinants of quality in qualitative research. A detailed review of literature related to collaboration did not only improve the researcher's conceptualization of the problem but also rendered the study theoretically and philosophically grounded, thus improving the validity and reliability of this study. A solid and lucid comprehension of the problem also resulted to an informed decision on the type of research method that will solve the problem. A qualitative research method characterized by empathic understanding of respondents' perspectives contributed in restricting preconceived judgements or biases and thus improved trustworthiness of the study.

In line with standard research procedures, prior to and during the data collection, formal letters of informed consent were presented to the respondents and right to collect data was approved. At the beginning of any interview session the respondents were reminded of the aim of the study, their rights to stay anonymous, confidentiality and their right to withdraw as respondents at any stage (Tracy, 2010; Mccauley, 2003).

Findings and discussion of results

In this section the NGOs and state education institution leaders' perceptions on collaboration and best practices to improve on partnerships that emerged from the data were presented as findings and discussed. To stay true to participants rights to anonymity, the following tags were given to respondents from SETAs: EL1, EL2 EL3; education NGOs: ENGO1, ENGO2, ENGO3 and ENGO4; Department of Rural Development: RDL1 and RDL2 respectively. Subsequently, direct citation from the data was referenced with the corresponding tag. Assisted by the research questions, the findings have been reported and discussed

according to means of collaboration, difficulties, and perspectives on improving collaboration

Means of collaboration

Research findings, as expressed by all the respondents from the education NGOs and SETAs, coupled with confirmation from RDL1 and RDL2, which were triangulated in the study, indicate the existence of a certain degree of collaboration in skills development between sectors. All the seven respondents from the SETAs and education NGO noted that collaboration is focused on developing skills in various agriculture and education and training constituencies in rural communities. This means that all the nine respondents that contributed in the study experienced some form of collaboration. For instance, RDL1 maintained that a number of NGOs also collaborate with their department in implementing practical training to rural land owners and farmers. This somewhat tally with Ulleberg (2009) pronouncement of the need for different modes of partnerships between sectors. In this study collaboration was visible in research, policy, planning, training, facilitation as well as in monitoring and evaluating, which correlates with the methods of engagement that Fox, Ward and Howard (2002) and Ulleberg (2009) envisaged. However, the nature of collaboration differs between NGOs (policy-based and implementation-based NGOs). For example ENGO1 and ENGO2 from one NGO emphasised that collaboration in the implementation of training programmes was their priority while ENGO3 and ENGO4 from another NGO viewed research and policy as their core areas of collaboration with the SETAs.

We respond to tenders...we self-initiate work and in most cases we focus on research and policy, and invite the government to view our activities or ideas. So you find that ...we are working together (ENGO4).

Research: All seven leaders from both sectors were conscious of the significance of inquiry in skills development and attaining other organizational goals, which to some extent, is indicative of the views of Greenwood(1997), and Johanson and Adams (2004) on the value of inquiry in groups that truly learn. According to respondents, collaboration in research has the objective of formulating and updating different Sector Skills Plans (SSPs) for skills development programmes. They experienced collaboration through joint research activities that helps to identify critical and scarce skills policy implementation by NGOs (service providers). This implies that collaboration in research is limited to spotting items that will be incorporated in SSPs and thus determine the planning and allocation of funds for implementation. Even though all the leaders from both sectors collaborated in research, their viewpoints on specific responsibilities differed.

Our current role is to identify the skills that the NGO sector needs for the next five years (ENGO2). We were involved in research with ETDP- SETA but we focus on the SSP update on research organizations (ENGO3).

Developing policy and planning: There was the perception from participants that partnering in research contributes in policy development and the designing and registration of programmes. The research participants highlighted the existence of collaboration in quality assurance and allocation of resources. Accordingly, participants from the NGO sector believe collaboration in policy

manifests through exchange of research results and recommendations with SETAs, thus contributing in formulating policy and updating SSPs. Conversely, SETAs ensure the availability of research findings for the NGOs. For example, while acknowledging the role of the Department of Social Development in making sure NGOs are funded, EL1 observed that their organization work with NGOs as one of its subsectors by providing funding. This respondent further mentioned that while both the NGOs and SETA design programmes, the programmes of the ETDP SETA are registered with SAQA and are quality assured.

Facilitation: All seven leaders from both sectors were in the opinion that SETAs play a pivotal role in building an enabling environment that fosters collaboration and skills development. Their acknowledgement of this element of collaboration is in line with what Fox et al (2002) envisaged to be the role of the government. Leaders from the SETAs made clear that facilitation is the process of creating an environment that enables the implementation of programmes. It involves skilling and up-skilling service providers (NGOs) with appropriate human capital as well as facilities, registration and issuing of licenses that qualify NGOs as accredited practitioners, as well as providing the necessary funding for NGOs to carry out the implementation of programmes.

Implementation and monitoring: Implementation has been interpreted by respondents as the real process of executing training. Training is administered by accredited NGOs and Community-based Organizations (CBOs) which, according to respondents, are designated as service providers for various skills constituencies. This is congruent with Ulleberg (2009) argument that NGOs, as stakeholders, have become core service providers in the education sector. ENGO1 and ENGO2 (from the same organization) perceived the execution of training as their main role in implementation as a mode of collaboration. This was confirmed by ENGO3 and ENGO4 from a policy-based NGO, as well as EL1. RDL1 also noticed the part played by NGOs as implementers of training programmes

We approach specific NGOs to assist us in training groups of rural farmers with specific types of skills or commodity. We have organized many meetings wherein we invited NGOs to explain to farmers how to prepare financial statements, balance sheets, income statements and cash flows (RDL1).

Monitoring and evaluation of training was viewed as another area of collaboration. According to EL1, ENGO1 and ENGO2, training providers are also responsible for monitoring and evaluating training projects. Nonetheless, results also revealed that monitoring and evaluation are seemingly words that informants are aware of but have not fully translated into practice. This seems to be an interesting finding. According to respondents, monitoring is confined to ensure that training takes place, with little or no interest in finding out how and how well it occurred, which broadly contradicts Yukl (2002) idea of “after activity review”.

Factors affecting collaboration

In this study informants repeatedly noted the occurrence of issues such as fragmentation in the NGO sector, over dependence on external funding, policy ambiguity, bureaucracy, inadequate communication and capacity as challenges of collaboration and skills development.

Fragmentation in the NGO sector: Disunity amongst NGOs has been perceived by respondents as worrisome in relation to collaboration. EL1 and EL2

envisaged easier and effective coordination between both sectors if the NGO sector has a strong and representative amalgamation that speaks in unison and whose actions are mutually beneficial. Informants also observed that presently SANGOCO is seemingly the main representative of all NGOs in South Africa. However, some contradictions existed as two participants from one NGO confirmed their affiliation with SANGOCO while two participants from another NGO claimed their organization does not have any alliance with SANGOCO.

NGOs actually struggle with collaboration ...They got different needs, agendas and are unable to speak in one language. They got similar challenges, similar issues, but to put them together and work together is a problem (EL1).

When one considers Julie's (2009) observation that the creation of SANGOCO as a coalition was inspired by the need to ensure unity and efficiency and enhance NGOs' sustainability, one could rightly deduce the non-existence of a significant association today in the NGO sector as betrayal of such goals seriously hampers NGOs' search for sustainability

Over-dependence on external funding: Overly dependence on external funding and the absence of a self-sustaining model amongst NGOs has been perceived by respondents as the triggers of fragmentation in the sector. The obscurity of a self-sustaining model within the NGO sector revealed that the NGOs have taken for granted (Julie, 2006) the relevance of developing income generating strategies that could keep them financially sustainable and thus reduce their vulnerability to funding crisis especially when there is lack of regular supply from donors. Overdependence on funding from the government questions NGOs sustainability and potentials to fully team-up with the state as partners as well as their autonomy, and thus tally with (Nelson, 2006) assessment that the their excessive reliance on funding from donors, compromises their autonomy and has created an opportunity for the government and donors to exert a substantial influence on their strategic choices, programmatic practices and political inclinations.

Inadequate capacity: The prevalence of inadequate capacities, especially within the NGO sector, was also revealed in the findings of this study. Research informants acknowledged the existence of inadequate manpower and facilities in the NGO sector. This, according to respondents, affects their resourcefulness, sustainability and also their aptitude to perform well as collaborators. For example, EL1 observed that most NGOs have very weak leadership and management capacities, and depended a lot on the government to develop their personnel. This was concurred by ENGO1 who observed that NGOs are not capacitated enough to manage, for that, it is a fact. This finding re-affirms Ulleberg (2009) observation that, even though they are considered essential actors in skills development, NGOs constantly suffer from inadequate resources. If it is true that organizational performance is a function of strategic leadership with required facilities (Mccauley, 2003), the occurrence of such lapses within the NGO sector in South Africa jeopardizes their performances both as stakeholders and as skills developers. When one reflects on theories that linked capability or personal mastery to teams that learn, curiosity arises on the performance of NGOs as entities and as partners. It could be inferred that inadequacy of resources hampered what Yukl (2002) termed "collective efficacy or potency", which then

translated into a downward negative spiral of performance in skills development initiatives.

Policy ambiguity: Policy uncertainty and insufficient clarity on the responsibilities of the department of education and training, social development and health of the NGO sector were perceived by respondents from both sectors as issues that deter collaboration. Even though participants from the SETAs observed an improvement in relations when compared to the early years of the democratic era, they still acknowledged the continuous existence of issues of clarity of role expectations amongst stakeholders. The on-going prevalence of policy ambiguity and confusion on what NGOs should do, adversely affected NGOs' operations and engagement with state departments. EL1 for instance argued that, while there is a legislature that regulates NGOs on what they are supposed to do, such a legislature failed to clarify how they can act and engage with various state departments and vice versa. Taking into cognisance Yukl (2002) assertion that the efficient performance of a team is also a function of how the role expectations of members are clearly stated so that they understand what is expected of them, and the rate at which interdependent activities of members are mutually consistent and coordinated, the prevalence of unclear roles and policy portrayed in this study is counterproductive to collaboration as well as skills development.

Bureaucracy and inadequate communication: Problems of administrative bottlenecks and ineffective communication between partners were perceived by participants as another challenge to collaboration. Respondents from education NGOs reported that the government departments take too long to respond to their requests, further complicated by protocol and hierarchy. They explained that the state departments contribute in wasting valuable time and resources. However, EL1 attributed the slow pace at which things happen to the state's aspiration to remain prudent with money from tax payers. Such an argument is seemingly one of those defensive routines designed to protect individuals and groups from embarrassment. Like Ulleberg (2009), informants from both sectors acknowledged that mutual suspicion or antagonism between them is a situation of the past. Even though all respondents disapproved the existence of mutual suspicion, their acknowledgement of the presence of bureaucratic red tapes in government departments in a way contradicts their judgment and poses a serious challenge to the degree of trust that exists between partners. For Greenwood (1997) withholding important information, provokes a feeling of mistrust among individuals. Furthermore, though EL1 noted that the state offers opportunities and services for NGOs, EL2, EL3 and all respondents from the NGOs pointed out that inadequate access to information about services and opportunities offered, makes it difficult for NGOs to take advantage of such provisions. This result highlighted the occurrence of inadequate communication and to a certain degree vindicates that collaboration doesn't work well between partners. This also confirms scholarly thinking on the relevance of connecting authentic dialogue and communication and organizational learning. Yukl (2002) for instance, thinks secrecy is the adversary of organizational learning.

Improving collaboration

This section provides answers to the third research question aimed at exploring possible ways of improving collaboration. Accordingly, findings revealed the following:

Strengthen collaboration: Research respondents acknowledged the presence of a certain degree of cross-organizational collaborative leadership practices between stakeholders. However, all the leaders that participated in the study strongly recommended the need to strengthen collaboration through the following ways: the creation of a vibrant coalition that synchronizes NGOs' ideas, and goals under an umbrella association; EL1 perceived efforts made by the Department of Social Development in organizing conferences and workshops for NGOs and ensuring their compulsory registration are some of the strategies the government uses to encourage NGOs to gel; even though some respondents were not convinced with the idea of having a broader union that would represent NGOs, they believed it would be less complicated and more realistic for NGOs to form coalitions under specific constituencies.

Leaders from both sectors also suggested more alliances and participatory mechanisms where both stakeholders have the opportunity to continuously engage.

Collaboration involves everything; communication, transport and accessibility, sharing and disseminating, awareness campaign is part of collaboration, at all times. It has to be strengthened (ENGO4). Now they are beginning to talk of partnerships and strategic alliances. The language is changing completely. Hope it will translate into practice (ENGO3).

Participants were also of the perception that the NGO sector in particular is really lacking in capacity and improving organizational capabilities particularly in the sector would level the playgrounds and ensure improve collaboration. ENGO1 for instance, proposed the need to provide NGOs' personnel with appropriate skills and resources that will enhance their management and leadership. They added that we need to capacitate them so that they have the confidence to exercise their duties. These proposals established the emphasis placed by Yukl, Gordon and Taber (2002) on effective leadership practices like providing opportunities for employees to improve their skills through professional development activities that will strengthen their knowledge base and promote individual and team capabilities as well as effective partnerships.

The findings of this study also revealed the need for organizations in the NGO sector to design and implement self-sustaining models and avoid being over dependent on the government and other external donors for funding so as to enhance their sustainability and strengthen collaboration as well as skills development. The recommendation of a self-sustaining model vindicates Julie (2006) thinking on the indispensability of good financial strategies like income generating projects that will advance their coping abilities when experiencing funding droughts from sponsors.

Respondents further perceived improving access to information and fostering authentic communication between sectors as vital in further strengthening collaboration. The research informants expounded that access to information and communication is currently irregular and is sometimes defined by the authority in charge of a given sector or department and even personal connections. Thus, there is a need for regular access to information and communication amongst

partners at any given time. The underlying idea in their submissions in a way harmonizes Lendrum (2003) pronouncement that the presence of skilled people and the absence of fear, barriers, hidden agendas, conflicts, mistrust, and poor communication enables effective collaboration to prevail since it inspires members and builds commitment and ownership of projects.

Proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms

Inadequate monitoring and evaluating of partnership and skills development activities was strongly perceived by respondents as another challenge that hampers collaboration and skills development. Accordingly, informants recommended proper and regular monitoring and evaluation of activities related to collaboration and skills development. To them such practices are helpful in knowing whether they are succeeding or not. Their suggestions also fall in line with the ideas of Yukl, Gordon and Taber (2002), Yukl and Lepsinger (2005), as well as other scholars on change leadership's pronouncement that evaluating individual and group performance in relation to change objectives, is an indispensable aspect of high performing teams and successful change actions.

Conclusion

The study explored the various methods of collaboration experienced by stakeholders, challenges encountered and possible ways of improving cross-organizational collaborative leadership practices in skills development. It has been revealed that both sectors collaborated through joint efforts in research, policy formulation, facilitation, planning, training and monitoring. These means of engagement vary with NGOs and their individual primary goals. In the process of collaborating, these organizations were continuously frustrated by challenges such as policy ambiguity, NGOs fragmentation, lack of authentic communication, bureaucratic bottlenecks, overdependence on external funding, weak capacity, lack of proper evaluating and monitoring practices. Even though the results of this study strongly revealed leaders from both sectors' awareness of the challenges that deterred collaboration and how things could be properly done (according to proposed solutions), the absence of a great spirit of resilience and commitment to effective leadership practices that foster partnerships overwhelmingly deprived them of the dividends that organizations would truly experience if they operated as learning organizations and communities.

Based on the findings of this study, the absence of fundamental leadership practices greatly mired team learning. Leadership that is deprived of meaningful benchmarks to measure and evaluate how well or badly organizational objectives of building sustainable networks have been attained, utterly exposes the team to unsuccessful attempts to enforce transformational change. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that could have enabled opportunities to reconsider policies and relational practices were neglected for such a long time. The absence of possibilities to detect and correct errors leaves the team with very limited space to improve on good practices and allows reoccurrence of unproductive practices up to a chronic stage where everything seems to collapse. Meaningful

practices like regular monitoring and evaluation should become the organizational culture of stakeholders involved and the partnering process.

It is also indispensable to strongly emphasize the need for partners to observe openness through genuine discussions and unlimited access to comprehensive information to collaborators. This does not only delete the frustration that arises from inadequate role clarity, but also inspires trust, encourages ownership of projects and strengthens the spirit of companionship.

It seems naive to envisage that NGOs in South Africa cannot effectively work in unison, because they are involved in different activities with many individual organizational objectives. Accordingly, the sector needs to embrace the challenge of building a strong and vibrant umbrella entity with a system that regulates their activities, set standards and support members to succeed. Thinking as part of a huge system or collective is very fundamental. The NGOs need to plan well, make more sacrifices and be committed in forging a broader bond.

The issue of NGOs maintaining a self-sustaining model now comes on board. It is actually difficult to be a strong and valuable partner when you are very susceptible to extinction. Sustainability encompasses financial, manpower and other forms of capacities which, according to the results of this study, are actually lacking in many NGOs. It would be erroneous to passively situate the NGO sector as an avenue for people with few qualifications, expertise, experience and professionalism, because it impedes their productive capacities and ability to relate well as partners. South African education NGOs should also think of mingling self-sustaining practices in their activities so that they can become financially stable, strong and great partners.

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